

# 2011

**REPORT: SPRING BREAK TRAVEL RISK MEXICO**

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# Travel and Security Risks: Spring Break in Mexico

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## Summary

Over the past 12 months, following the eruption of large-scale hostilities between the Gulf cartel and its former enforcer arm Los Zetas, violence has spread throughout Mexico. Cartel rifts and shifting alliances have resulted in violent cartel turf wars in parts of the country previously considered quiet, and these deteriorating security conditions in Mexico present significant concerns for the upcoming spring-break season, when American college students flock to warmer coastal climes. While some areas in Mexico are still worse than others, none of the coastal tourism hot spots is without real risk.

## Analysis

Every year between January and March, U.S. college administrations broadcast warnings to their students reminding them to exercise caution and wisdom while on spring break. All too often, those well-meaning guidelines go unread by the intended recipients. Travel warnings issued by the U.S. State Department may also be disregarded or unnoticed by many other U.S. citizens planning spring trips. Many regular visitors to Mexican resort areas believe cartels have no intention of hurting tourists because of the money tourists bring into the Mexican economy.

This is not an accurate assessment. None of the Mexican drug cartels has displayed any behavior to indicate it would consciously keep tourists out of the line of fire or away from gruesome displays of its murder victims. The violence is spreading, and while tourists may not be directly targeted by the cartels, they can be caught in the crossfire or otherwise exposed to the carnage.

## Intensifying Cartel Wars

The Mexican drug cartels have been fighting each other for more than two decades, but this expanded phase, which has pitted the federal government against the cartels, began in December 2006, when newly elected President Felipe Calderon dispatched federal troops to Michoacan to put an end to the cartel violence in that state. With this action, Calderon upset the relative equilibrium among the cartels, and the violence has been escalating and spreading ever since.

The statistics for cartel-related deaths clearly illustrate this acceleration of violence. There were 2,119 such deaths in 2006, 2,275 in 2007, 5,207 in 2008, 6,598 in 2009 and 15,273 in 2010. Statistics compiled from a U.S. State Department database indicate that of the 1,017 U.S. citizens who died in Mexico from 2004 through June 2010, 277 of them died as a result of cartel violence. Notable incidents include the Dec. 30, 2009, abduction and execution of a California school administrator from a restaurant in Gomez Palacio, Durango state, where he and his wife were dining with relatives during their vacation (the victim's body was found later that day,



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dumped with five other male victims abducted from the restaurant), and the killing of U.S. citizen David Hartley while in Mexican waters on Falcon Lake on Sept. 30, 2010.

In all areas of Mexico, lawlessness increased significantly during 2010. SCG has often discussed the dangers for any foreigner traveling to such cities as Juarez, Veracruz, Mexicali, Tijuana, Monterrey and Mexico City. In the more traditional tourist resort destinations — such as Los Cabos in Baja California Sur, Pacific coast destinations from Mazatlan to Acapulco, and Yucatan Peninsula destinations centered on Cozumel and Cancun — two distinct but overlapping criminal activities are in play: drug trafficking and petty crime. The most powerful criminal elements are the drug trafficking organizations, or cartels. The main financial interests of the cartels lie in drug- and human-smuggling operations. This does not mean tourists have been consciously protected, avoided or otherwise insulated from cartel violence. The tourism industry itself is not relevant to the cartels' primary activities, but because the coastal resorts are near cities with ports, which are used by the cartels as transit zones, the battles for control of these ports put resort guests close to the violence.

So while these two main “economic cultures” in Mexico — drug trafficking and tourism — seldom actually intersect, they can overlap. And to make things worse, 2010 saw the cartels greatly increasing their influence over municipal- and state-level law enforcement entities, far beyond previous levels, and corruption among Mexico's law enforcement bodies has reached epidemic proportions. Today, visitors should not be surprised to encounter police officers who are expecting bribes as a matter of routine or involved in extortion and kidnapping-for-ransom gangs.

This expansion of cartel influence over local law enforcement is evident in the growing number of assassinations and incidents of intimidation, bribery and infiltration — to the point that many of the local and regional law enforcement agencies have been rendered ineffective. This means wherever law enforcement operates — both in areas where tourists go and in areas where they do not — police officers can be unresponsive, unpredictable and often unwilling to intercede in problems involving residents and visitors alike. That is not to say traditional resort areas like Cancun, Mazatlan or Acapulco have no law enforcement presence, only that municipal police in these cities have demonstrated a thoroughgoing reluctance to get involved in preventing or responding to criminal acts unless it is to their benefit to do so.

This brings into play the second criminal element in Mexico, which is found in tourist-centric areas around the world: pickpockets, thieves, rapists and small-time kidnappers who thrive in target-rich environments. Criminals in this group can include freelancing cartel members, professional crooks and enterprising locals, all of whom have benefited greatly from cartel efforts to neutralize local-level law enforcement in Mexico.



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## Implications for Resort Areas

What these developments mean for any U.S. citizen headed to Mexican beaches for spring break is that popular locations that until recently were perceived to have “acceptable” levels of crime are starting to see violence related to the drug wars raging in Mexico. Firefights between federal police or soldiers and cartel gunmen armed with assault rifles have erupted without warning in small mountain villages and in large cities like Monterrey as well as in resort towns like Acapulco and Cancun. While the cartels have not intentionally targeted tourists, their violence increasingly has been on public display in popular tourist districts. A couple of recent examples in Acapulco include two incendiary grenades being thrown into a restaurant on Oct. 12, 2010, and the Dec. 17 kidnapping by unidentified gunmen of two employees from the nightclub where they worked. The victims were later discovered shot to death.

Acapulco is a good example of a Mexican resort city turned battleground. There are three distinct groups involved in a vicious fight for control of the city and its lucrative port. Two are factions of the Beltran Leyva Organization (BLO) — one headed by Hector Beltran Leyva, currently known as the South Pacific cartel, the other still referred to as the BLO but consisting of individuals loyal to Edgar “La Barbie” Valdez Villareal. The third group is known as the Independent Cartel of Acapulco. Over the last six months, there have been many grisly displays of severed heads and decapitated bodies left in full view in and near tourist districts. On Jan. 31, federal police in Acapulco arrested Miguel Gomez Vasquez, who allegedly was linked to 15 decapitations in Acapulco in January. On Jan. 9, in the Benito Juarez area of Acapulco, police discovered three bodies hanging from a bridge on Highway 95, a major thoroughfare that leads out of the city to the state capital.

It also is important to understand the risks associated with traveling to a country that is engaged in ongoing counternarcotics operations involving thousands of military and federal law enforcement personnel. Mexico is, in many ways, a war zone. While there are important differences among the security environments in Mexico’s various resort areas, and between the resort towns and other parts of Mexico, some security generalizations can be made about the entire country. One is that Mexico’s reputation for crime and kidnapping is well deserved. Locals and foreigners alike often become victims of assault, express kidnappings (in which the victim can spend a week in the trunk of a vehicle as his or her kidnappers go from one ATM to the next withdrawing all the money in that account), high-value-target kidnappings and other crimes.

Further complicating the situation is the marked decline in overall law and order during 2010, combined with large-scale counternarcotics operations that keep the bulk of Mexico’s federal forces busy, which has created an environment in which criminals not associated with the drug trade can flourish. Carjackings and highway robberies, for example, are increasingly common in



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Mexico, particularly in cities along the border and between those cities and Mexican resorts within driving distance.

Other security risks in the country are posed by the security services themselves. When driving, it is important to pay attention to the military-manned highway roadblocks and checkpoints that are established to screen vehicles for drugs and cartel operatives. Police officers and soldiers manning checkpoints have opened fire on vehicles driven by innocent people who failed to follow instructions at the checkpoints, which are often not well marked.

It is important to note, too, that roadblocks — stationary or mobile — being operated by cartel gunmen disguised as government troops have been well documented for several years across Mexico. We have been unable to confirm whether they have been encountered in popular resort areas, but if they have not, there is the strong possibility they will be, given the increase in violence in the port cities. And as violence escalates near Mexico's resort towns (see below), SCG anticipates that cartels will use all the tools at their disposal — without hesitation — to win the fight, wherever it happens to be taking place. An encounter with a checkpoint or roadblock that is operated by gunmen disguised as federal police or military personnel can be at least frightening and at worst deadly. Driving around city streets in resort towns or roads in the surrounding countryside is becoming increasingly dangerous.

Along with the beautiful beaches that attract foreign tourists, many well-known Mexican coastal resort towns grew around port facilities that have come to play strategic roles in the country's drug trade. Drug trafficking organizations use legitimate commercial ships as well as fishing boats and other small surface vessels to carry shipments of cocaine from South America to Mexico, and many cartels often rely on hotels and resorts to launder drug proceeds. Because of the importance of these facilities, the assumption has been that drug trafficking organizations generally seek to limit violence in such areas, not only to protect existing infrastructure but also to avoid the attention that violence affecting wealthy foreign tourists would draw.

This is no longer a safe assumption. The profound escalation of cartel-related conflict in Mexico has created an environment in which deadly violence can occur anywhere — with complete disregard for bystanders, whatever their nationality or status. Moreover, the threat to vacationing foreigners is not just the potential of being caught in the crossfire but also of inadvertently crossing cartel gunmen. Even trained U.S. law enforcement personnel can be caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. In Mexico, no one is immune from the violence.

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## *Cancun and Cozumel*

Cancun's port remains an important point of entry for South American drugs transiting Mexico on their way to the United States. Los Zetas activity in the area remains high, with a steady flow of drugs and foreign nationals entering the smuggling pipeline from Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba and other points of origin in the greater Caribbean Basin. There also have been reports that many

members of the Cancun city police have been or are on the Zeta payroll. These developments have brought new federal attention to the city, and rumors are circulating that the federal government plans to deploy additional military troops to the region to investigate the local police and conduct counternarcotics operations.



At this writing, few if any additional troops have been sent to Cancun, but ongoing shake-ups in the law enforcement community there have only added to the area's volatility. Though less easily utilized for smuggling activity, Cozumel, Isla Mujeres and associated tourist zones have seen some violence. According to official statistics, cartel-related deaths in the island resort spots off the Quintana Roo coast doubled from 2009 to 2010, from 32 to 64. (For unknown reasons, the government of Mexico's statistical database does not contain any data for Cancun itself. A quick tally conducted by SCG indicated that approximately 53 executions or gunbattle fatalities occurred in Cancun in 2010.)

## *Acapulco*

Acapulco has become Mexico's most violent resort city. The Mexican government's official accounting of cartel-related deaths in Acapulco jumped to 370 in 2010, up 147 percent from 2009. Rival drug cartels have battled police and each other within the city as well as in nearby towns. Suspected drug traffickers continue to attack police in the adjacent resort area of Zihuatanejo, and at least six officers have been killed there within the past two weeks. Between Feb. 17 and Feb. 20, 12 taxi drivers and passengers were killed in Acapulco.



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## *Puerto Vallarta*

Puerto Vallarta's location on the Pacific coast makes it strategically important to trafficking groups that send and receive maritime shipments of South American drugs and Chinese ephedra, a precursor chemical used in the production of methamphetamine, much of which is produced in the areas surrounding the nearby city of Guadalajara. Several of Mexico's largest and most powerful drug cartels maintain a trafficking presence in Puerto Vallarta and the nearby municipality of Jarretaderas. Incidents of cartel-related deaths in Puerto Vallarta are relatively low compared to places like Acapulco, but there were still 13 in 2009 and 15 in 2010. Threats from kidnapping gangs or other criminal groups also are said to be lower in this resort city than in the rest of the country, but caution and situational awareness should always be maintained. Official statistics of cartel-related deaths for the nearby city of Guadalajara jumped to 68 in 2010 from 35 in 2009, an increase of 94 percent.

## *Mazatlan*

Mazatlan, located just a few hundred kilometers north of Puerto Vallarta, has been perhaps the most consistently violent of Mexico's resort cities during the past year. It is located in Sinaloa state, home of the country's most violent cartel, the Sinaloa Federation, and bodies of victims of drug cartels and kidnapping gangs appear on the streets there on a weekly basis. The sheer level of violence means the potential for collateral damage is high. The trend upward in the official statistical data is significant. There were 97 recorded cartel-related deaths in 2009, and that number jumped to 320 deaths in 2010, a 230 percent increase.

## *Cabo San Lucas*

Located on the southern tip of the Baja California peninsula, Cabo San Lucas and the greater Los Cabos region has been relatively insulated from the country's drug-related violence and can be considered one of the safer places in Mexico for foreign tourists. Although historically it has been a stop on the cocaine trafficking routes, Cabo San Lucas' strategic importance decreased dramatically after the heyday of cartel activities there in the late 1990s, as the Tijuana cartel lost its contacts with Colombian cocaine suppliers (the result of joint U.S.-Colombian counternarcotics activities). Over the last five years, drug trafficking in the area has been limited. Still, the southern Baja is part of Mexico, and Cabo San Lucas has ongoing problems with crime, including kidnapping, theft and assault as well as some continuing drug trafficking. Despite the relative lack of cartel violence in the area, official statistics for the greater Los Cabos region show nine deaths in 2010, up from one in 2009.





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## *Matamoros*

Though Matamoros itself is not a spring break hot spot, we are including it in this discussion because of its proximity to South Padre Island (SPI), Texas. It long has been the practice of adventurous vacationers on the south end of SPI to take advantage of the inexpensive alcohol and lower drinking age south of the border, mainly in Matamoros and the surrounding towns clustered along the Rio Grande. But is important to note that drug- and human-smuggling activities in that region of Mexico are constant, vital to Los Zetas and the Gulf cartel and ruthlessly conducted. On Jan. 29, the Zetas went on the offensive against the Gulf cartel, and running firefights are expected to persist in the Matamoros area into and beyond the spring break season. Visitors should not venture south into Mexico from SPI.

## **General Safety Tips**

If travel to Mexico is planned or necessary, visitors should keep in mind the following:

- Do not drive at night.
- Use only pre-arranged transportation between the airport and the resort or hotel.
- If at a resort, plan on staying there; refrain from going into town, particularly at night.
- If you do go into town (or anywhere off the resort property), do not accept a ride from unknown persons, do not go into shabby-looking bars, do not wander away from brightly lit public places and do not wander on the beach at night.
- Stop at all roadblocks.
- Do not bring anything with you that you are not willing to have taken from you.
- If confronted by an armed individual who demands the possessions on your person, give them up.
- Do not bring ATM cards linked to your bank account. (Among other things, an ATM card can facilitate an express kidnapping.)
- Do not get irresponsibly intoxicated.
- Do not accept a drink from a stranger, regardless of whether you are male or female.
- Do not make yourself a tempting target by wearing expensive clothing or jewelry.
- Do not venture out alone. Being part of a group does not guarantee “safety in numbers” but it does lessen the risk.